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State Dept. review completed

Central Intelligence Agency



Washington, D.C. 20505

28 March 1985

CUBA-USSR: PRESIDENT CASTRO SNUBS MOSCOW [REDACTED]

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Summary

Castro's decision not to attend the funeral of Soviet General Secretary Konstantin Chernenko on 13 March apparently was intended to underscore his continued dissatisfaction with several elements of Soviet policy. We believe Castro probably has been irritated in recent months by the slowdown in Soviet oil deliveries and Moscow's efforts to force economic austerity on Cuba, Soviet reluctance to engage the US more forcefully in Central America, and Soviet policy in Africa. Castro evidently concluded that a symbolic rebuke to the Soviets would be more beneficial for Cuban interests than any favor he could curry by attending the funeral. The fact that Castro passed up the opportunity to meet Gorbachev, whose tenure seems likely to be extended, suggests he is pessimistic that relations can be improved in the near term. In our view, however, the fundamental relationship does not appear threatened. [REDACTED]

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This memorandum was requested by Kenneth Skoug, Director of the Office of Cuban Affairs, State Department. It was prepared by [REDACTED] Office of African and Latin American Analysis. Comments and queries are welcome and should be addressed to Chief, Middle America-Caribbean Division, [REDACTED]

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Many Theories Offered

Castro subsequently tried to dampen rumors about his absence from the funeral by emphatically denying to a US television network interviewer that his failure to attend was a sign of Cuban-Soviet friction. Nevertheless, his decision to send his younger brother, Armed Forces Minister Raul Castro, in his stead to such a key event is a significant breach of protocol that has given rise to broad speculation regarding Castro's motivation. Theories abound: Castro was too ill to make the trip; he wanted to demonstrate his independence and substantiate his hints to Western leaders that he is ready to be weaned away from the Soviets; he is angry over the USSR's refusal to confront Washington over Nicaragua; he is dissatisfied with the level of Soviet economic support; he disliked Chernenko because of his policy toward the Third World and his "conciliatory approach" to the US; he had too heavy a workload; he believed the politico-military situation in the region required his presence in Havana; or he conspired with the Soviets on the whole affair for reasons that are not yet clear. [REDACTED]

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In the normal course of events, we believe Castro would have been sure to make the trip to Moscow. No matter what opinion he had of Chernenko's policies, it is unlikely that anything would be gained by slighting his successor. Indeed, the demise of the leader whose policies displease Castro would seem to open up opportunities for change that could be exploited through personal contact with the successor. As for illness, there has been no indication that Castro was indisposed at the time of the funeral; in fact, Western officials who went spear-fishing with him in January reported he was in excellent health. [REDACTED]

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Moreover, the trip seemed to offer several additional benefits. In a personal vein, Castro has long demonstrated an appreciation for leaders who have youth, vitality, and charisma--qualities he can readily relate to--and he probably recognizes all three in Mikhail Gorbachev. Moreover, the trip to Moscow would have given the prestige-conscious Cuban President the chance to mingle with other chiefs of state and international dignitaries as well as to make a personal assessment of Gorbachev. Despite the claims of a heavy workload, we believe there was no domestic factor of overriding importance to keep him at home; precedent--he attended the funerals of both Brezhnev and Andropov--also called for him to go. The interview on US television was not critical and could have been postponed for a few days; indeed, it would have been more newsworthy to interview Castro after he had met with Gorbachev. [REDACTED]

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At the same time, Castro probably saw distinct disadvantages in a dutiful trek to Moscow at the very time he is trying to [REDACTED]

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[redacted]

convince international observers, particularly in West Europe, that he is prepared to put some distance between himself and the Soviets. While sending a stand-in to the funeral risked offending Moscow, it could be viewed as evidence of his independence by those Western leaders who, over the past six months, have visited Havana and want to believe the claims of Castro and other official spokesmen that Cuba is ready for a new opening to the West. Former Chancellor of West Germany and current President of the Socialist International Willy Brandt, for example, came home from Cuba last October with the clear impression that Castro would like to free himself from his dependence on the Soviet Union, according to a discussion Brandt had at our Embassy in Bonn. Similarly, Helmut Schaefer, a deputy in West Germany's Parliament and international affairs spokesman for the Liberal Democratic Party, after a week in Cuba in mid-January, told the press that Havana was obviously seeking greater independence from Moscow and wanted a dialogue with the US. [redacted]

[redacted]

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Wary of Gorbachev

Perhaps more important in our view, however, is what appears to be a reluctance on Castro's part to come face-to-face with a new Soviet leader whose economic bent is likely to raise additional problems for Havana in an already austere climate. In weighing the pros and cons of attending the funeral, we believe Castro must have realized that in any meeting with Gorbachev there would be no chance of reversing the unpalatable Soviet decision of last year to reduce the Cuban burden on the Soviet economy; at best, Gorbachev would only reinforce the decision. At worst, Gorbachev might have warned Castro that even further restrictions on Soviet assistance were in the offing. In our assessment, Castro then would have been caught in the uncomfortable and ego-bruising role of mendicant, pleading for more generosity from a new superpower chief who is almost five years younger than he. [redacted]

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We conclude Castro must also have known that one of the Soviet Politburo's staunchest supporters of Gorbachev's economic policies is Vitali Vorotnikov, according to a Soviet economist who talked to a US Embassy officer in Moscow on 11 March. As ambassador to Cuba from April 1979 to July 1982, Vorotnikov had extensive first-hand experience observing enormous amounts of Soviet assistance disappear into an economy noted for its waste and inefficiency. In his more than three years in Cuba, Vorotnikov must have dealt with Castro on many occasions and had ample opportunity to appreciate how disruptive Castro's meddling in economic matters can be. The Gorbachev-Vorotnikov relationship, therefore, probably looms as an ominous reminder to Castro that Soviet demands regarding Cuba's economic performance in coming years will inevitably restrict his independence in foreign affairs and require him to carry out additional austerity

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measures at home that are certain to be unpopular in an already dissatisfied society. With such unpleasant prospects in store, we judge Castro had little incentive to attend the funeral. [REDACTED]

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By sending Raul in his stead, Castro may have had a double purpose. If austerity is to be increased in Cuba at Soviet insistence, then Moscow can explain to Raul why his Armed Forces Ministry must shoulder much of the burden of cutbacks. (When the Soviets insisted on more pragmatic Cuban economic policies in the late 1960s and early 1970s, Raul's ministry was one of the major victims of cutbacks and, according to Fidel's later claim, underwent a manpower reduction of sixty percent.) In addition, Raul will have had the opportunity to follow up on the 6 March meeting of Soviet, Angolan, and Cuban representatives in Moscow that presumably involved discussions of military matters in southern Africa, including the troop withdrawal issue. Joining Raul for his talks with Soviet officials was Jorge Risquet, the Cuban Politburo official in charge of African affairs who represented Havana at the 6 March meeting, according to press reports. [REDACTED]

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If recent indications of a cutback in supplies of Soviet oil to Cuba are accurate, it is possible that Castro chose to stay home to signal to the new Soviet leader that a serious problem had arisen in the relationship that required immediate attention. While the trend in Soviet oil deliveries--they satisfy about 95 percent of total Cuban consumption--has been down since 1982 as Havana made greater efforts to conserve, [REDACTED]

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Castro is likely to suspect political motivation behind his new oil problems. We believe he is certain to recall Moscow's exploitation of his oil vulnerability in 1967 that forced him to make major policy shifts that included broad domestic reforms and sharp cutbacks in subversive activities. [REDACTED]

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Western Opinion

The US Interests Section in Havana, however, rejects the thesis that economics is at the bottom of Castro's decision to stay home. Instead, it points to Castro's need to provide substance to his current campaign--under way since last fall--to convince foreign officials that Cuba is ready to be weaned away from the USSR. To demonstrate to Western leaders that Cuba wants a new opening to the West, Castro, perhaps even with Soviet connivance, goes through with what in effect is a meaningless gesture of failing to attend the funeral. In theory, this would improve Cuba's chances of expanding exports to Western countries anxious to drive a wedge between Havana and Moscow, would appeal to those in the US who call for improved ties with the Castro regime, and would undercut US efforts to draw a Soviet link to Cuban meddling in Central America. Economic and political benefits would thus accrue to both Cuba and the USSR. [redacted]

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A Western Ambassador in Havana, on the other hand, rejects both the economic theory and the suggestion that Cuba and the USSR collaborated in a ruse to mislead the West and give the appearance of a rift in the bilateral relationship. He also dismisses out of hand suggestions that Castro was ill at the time of the funeral or was compelled to stay at home to honor his commitment to an interview with the US television network. At the same time, he admits he has no ready explanation of his own for Castro's behavior and believes none of the current spate of theories provides a satisfactory rationale for the Cuban leader's decision to stay home. [redacted]

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[redacted] attributed Castro's decision to his displeasure with Soviet policy toward Nicaragua, [redacted] Castro also was frustrated and annoyed by Chernenko's "conciliatory approach" to the US. [redacted] Castro was irked in March 1984 when Chernenko refused to allow a Soviet naval flotilla to approach Nicaraguan waters after a Soviet tanker was damaged by a mine in a Nicaraguan port. With Chernenko dead, however, Castro's signal of displeasure over an incident of a year ago would be pointless, in our estimation, and would hardly be expected to nudge the new Soviet leader toward a more supportive stance on Nicaragua vis-a-vis the US. In any event, Castro himself has been engaged in an effort to reduce tensions with the US and is not in a position to criticize similar efforts on Moscow's part. [redacted]

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Conclusions

In the final analysis, it would appear that Castro did indeed intend to signal Moscow that he is dissatisfied with the current trend of the relationship. He not only opted to stay home, but he also slighted the Soviets by signing the book of

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condolences at the Soviet Embassy in Havana four days after Chernenko died--and three days after other Cuban officials (Vice President Rodriguez and Foreign Minister Malmierca) had signed it. There is some question as to whether Castro signed it at all; TASS noted his appearance at the Soviet Embassy on 14 March; the Cuban media never mentioned it. [REDACTED]

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Moreover, the wording of the TASS announcement following Raul Castro's meeting with Gorbachov reflected frictions: the two discussed "questions" pertaining to the "perfecting of the Soviet-Cuban relationship," which implies that snags have been encountered on the road to improved ties; "views were exchanged on topical international issues," which indicates the views did not coincide; and the meeting proceeded in an atmosphere of "full mutual understanding" rather than full mutual agreement. Raul apparently was faithfully passing on Fidel's dissatisfaction to Gorbachev. [REDACTED]

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We believe this dissatisfaction stems from not one but several important irritants, including: the slowdown in Soviet oil deliveries and economic relations with the USSR in general, Soviet reluctance to engage the US more forcefully in Central America, and Soviet policy in Africa. In assessing the impact Gorbachev is likely to have on Moscow's policy toward Cuba, Castro apparently has come to the conclusion that a symbolic rebuke--failure to attend the funeral--would be more beneficial for Cuban interests than attending the funeral and meeting the new Soviet party boss face-to-face. This suggests he saw virtually no chance of personally exerting a favorable influence on Gorbachev and wanted no part of a trip that would cast him in the role of an obedient puppet. [REDACTED]

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While Cuba's relationship with the new administration in Moscow has unquestionably gotten off on the wrong foot, Castro, in our opinion, has no intention of pursuing his frustration to the point of a break with the Soviets. Serious frictions have developed but, in our judgment, Cuba has no alternative to Moscow's massive economic and military support. In the meantime, he probably will try to capitalize on the impact his independent behavior will have in Western capitals, seeking increased exports and tourism to help alleviate some of his mounting economic problems. [REDACTED]

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CHRONOLOGY OF EVENTS

1985

March 6	Soviet-Angolan-Cuban meeting in Moscow; Politburo member Jorge Risquet represents Cuba
March 8	Fidel Castro delivers closing address to the Fourth Congress of the Cuban Women's Federation
March 11	Armed Forces Minister Raul Castro leaves Havana for Moscow
March 13	Chernenko funeral
March 14	Raul Castro meets with Ethiopia's Mengistu in Moscow
March 14	Raul Castro meets with Angola's Dos Santos in Moscow
March 14	Fidel Castro begins six-hour interview for a US television network in Havana; the interview continues into the morning of March 15
March 15	Raul Castro meets with Namibia guerrilla chief Nujoma in Moscow
March 18	Jorge Risquet meets Ponomarev in Moscow to discuss "diverse international problems"
March 19	Raul Castro and Jorge Risquet meet Defense Minister Sokolov and First Deputy Defense Minister Akhromeyev in Moscow
March 20	Raul Castro and Jorge Risquet meet General Secretary Gorbachev and party Secretary Rusakov in Moscow

SUBJECT: President Castro Snubs Moscow

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